

# Fast Track

## A Short Course in Speed Training

by [Mike Keohane](#)

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**Many runners begin their athletic careers on the track, where the accuracy of a measured oval provides a degree of comfort to those taking their first steps to fitness.** Later, increasing confidence (and boredom) lead most of them to the less limiting avenues of the roads and trails. Having progressed from jogger to runner, it's perhaps ironic that in attempting the third progression to racer most of them return to the track once again.



Track workouts and speed training are not world's best runners seldom if ever set s fartlek or pickups in the course of a ng to dabble in speedwork, the precise nging training less daunting. Knowing the allows you to concentrate on performing terrain, or where you will be when you're

Whether you are coming to the track for the first time, returning to the track, or a regular trackster looking for some advanced theory to enhance your workouts, we present the following two short courses in training on the track.

## Track Basics: Freshman Orientation



**Many runners suffer from track-phobia.** Perhaps you have been running for years and have heard about track workouts, but have shied away from them because they sound too hard or you're worried about being dead last at your running club's weekly track sessions. Perhaps you are afraid you will feel out of place in this venue dedicated to the swift of

feet. Fear no more. Here we present all you need to know to start off on the right foot at any track.

### Types of Tracks:

**Indoor tracks:** Found mostly in the colder climate states, indoor tracks generally vary from 150 to 200 meters around. Some have banked turns and some are flat. There are several surfaces; the "faster" competition tracks have a synthetic, extra bouncy material on them. Many years ago wood surfaces were the norm for indoor tracks, especially for racing. They offered great traction for spikes, but were hazardous. The Armory in Manhattan used to have a doctor at each meet who would sit at one end of the track with a magnifying glass and tweezers (get the picture?).

**Outdoor tracks:** Most are made of durable all weather material. Rubber or polyurethane are the most popular surfaces, but you may also find tracks made of asphalt, cinders or even grass.

### Track Etiquette:

- **Try to use a track that is open to the public during its OPEN hours** (no hopping locked fences or working out during a school team's practices or meets).
- **Warm up (and cool down) in the outer-most lane of the track going in a clockwise direction.** (This balances the strain on your legs by reversing the normal running direction; also you'll be able to avoid runners doing workouts in the inside lanes.) Better yet, use the roads or fields outside the track.
- **If someone else or a group is doing a track workout:**

*(a) You may want to ask if they have started and would like some company.* It is easier to do a workout with someone else, as long as that person is close in ability to you. Be prepared, however, to either do their workout or to do some of your workout after you have finished doing theirs. An important note here is: Don't let the "workout" become a "race." Remember, track training is a controlled hard effort and races are all-out efforts.

*(b) You want to stay out of the other person's (or group's) way, so **do your recovery jog between intervals in the outside lanes** or on the infield of the track.*

*(c) When finishing an interval, **"STOP, LOOK, LISTEN"**; if anyone is coming up behind you, get off the track to the safest and closest area you can find, usually the infield.*

*(d) When finishing a repeat and there is someone in your lane, steer clear of them.* Stop your watch a little before or after the finish so you don't run

someone down because you had to get an exact lap time.



- **Be courteous while doing a track workout.** If it is a community track you will need to be flexible in your approach. You will have to run around people who are walking or jogging. It is also good discipline to learn to tune out distractions during your workout. After all, have you ever been to a quiet, solitary race? If you can't do this, then find a time when the track is not in use, so you can do your workout alone.
- **Listen for "TRACK!"** When uttered (no matter how loud, obnoxious, and/or

gut-wrenching) on a track at any time this means someone is coming in your lane and you need to quickly move out of the way. Remember, tracks are like the autobahn—the faster person has the right of way, and there is always someone faster.

## Warm-ups

To maximize your workouts, do the following before each track session:

- **(1) Stretches:** If you stretched before running your warm-up, then stretch a little more; work on your lower back, hips, iliotibial band, and groin.
- **(2) Form Drills:** These are running-specific exercises that help you work on efficient running form before you begin your actual workout.

*High skips:* Nice high arm swings, straight forward and straight back, and nice high knees for approximately 50 meters.

*Jumping rope:* Without the rope; bounce with your feet coming just slightly off the ground.

*Butt-kicks:* Rapidly kick your feet up towards your butt for a distance of 50 meters.

*High knee walking:* "March of the wooden soldier" (for 50 meters). Make sure you bring your knees up to a 90 degree angle, and swing your arms at the same angle.

*High knee skipping:* Skip with your knees coming up to hip-height (90 degrees bent knee). For 50 meters pretend you have a concrete roof 2" above your head, so stay low.

*A chorus line (cariocas):* Walk sideways, start by crossing one leg in front of the other, then behind, and keep repeating this. Go 30 meters, then reverse direction, using the other leg to cross in front and then in back, etc.

- **(3) Strides:** 50 meter accelerations, with a brief rest between each. Do approximately 4-6 strides. Start easy and pick up the pace on each successive

stride, not going to an all out sprint, just get your pace up to workout speed.

## Shoes

- **Make sure the training shoes you use on a track are flexible, cushioned, moderately supportive, and snug fitting.** Turns are murder in a stiff motion control shoe. A lightweight trainer makes a good track workout shoe (and a good racing shoe for most runners).
- **Racing flats should usually be left for race days.** You may feel faster, and even run faster, but you are more prone to foot injuries due to the reduced cushioning and support. It's okay to run one or two workouts in racing flats to get used to them before the race.

## Form

Once you have the perfect shoe, you can work on perfecting your running form. When you run on a track you are not only trying to run faster, but more efficiently and with better economy. Take a look at any track meet on TV and you will see most of the runners have ideal form. They run with great posture, tall with their chests out, head up, and swinging their arms. You may not be that fast, but that's why you should try to imitate their running style. You should improve your running form through track workouts, not undermine it.

## Injury Prevention

Elite steeplechaser **Tom Nohilly** has remained competitive at a world-class level for many years by "listening to my body and learning its limits, consistent training, and stretching and strengthening every possible muscle I use for running." Nohilly suggests:

- **Warmup and cool down** properly to prevent soreness.
- **Assess the workout:** Be honest with yourself. Have you recovered from that flu bug? Is this workout too soon after a race? Are you rested? It's okay, and even smart, to skip a workout from time to time.
- **Stretch and massage after every track workout:** Make sure you work on the areas you have stressed the most: hips, lower back, quadriceps, calves, feet, ankles, shoulders, neck, iliotibial band. Don't run right from your workout to the car and drive home.
- **Avoid tight-turned tracks**, like the shorter ones found indoors, if you have tight hips or lower back.
- **Recovery:** Eat a good meal, drink lots of fluids, and get some sleep.

**Mike Barnow**, who coaches the Westchester, N.Y. Puma Track Club and has been coaching a Wednesday night running workout at White Plains High in N.Y. for 23+ years, offers some insights for people who are just beginning track training:

- **Don't run too hard in track sessions and injure yourself.** It is the fastest way to improve but can be the quickest way to get injured.
- **Take a few days rest** after each track session and run only one track session per week.

- **Get back into track work gradually.** If you're coming back to the track after a layoff or a winter break, either leave your watch at home or pay no attention to it. You shouldn't try to match your times at your peak from last season or before your break.
- **Come to the workout rested,** not right from a bike ride or the pool or the weight room.

### Final Coaching Tips:

- **Use your arms to run faster.** Swinging them forward and back will help you tremendously. Don't lock your elbows and run like a robot.
- **Improve your running efficiency by occasionally glancing down at your feet and hands while running to make sure they aren't crossing the mid-line of your body.** Improve both by swinging straight forward and straight back, arm and leg in opposing direction.
- **Make sure you are pointing your toes and feet in the direction you are running,** this includes the turns. This will give you better control/traction on the track.
- Give your legs a break, **switch directions on the track from time to time.**

I hope this short primer helps build your confidence and inspires you to try track training to improve your times. Training on the track can be a lot of fun. Just like anything else, when you know a little more about what to do and what not to do, the whole experience is more fulfilling.

For more on interval training, check out [Interval Training: Senior Seminar](#) and our [Supplemental Reading List](#).

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